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ABSTRACT

In studying the lyrics of popular music, and particularly aspects of violent attitudes toward women, teachers discover what language represents to students and what students experience through the songs. The texts created about artifacts like song lyrics suggest more about the students as knowers than about the objects being studied. Exploring issues of violence against women in song led to the examination of problematic associations of identity and difference in students' interpretations of a student's analysis of an album by the group Metallica. The question of whether any listener can fully identify with a subjectivity completely different from her own problematizes any critique of sexist or violent imagery in pop music. Students often see women as deserving of their situations and saw no need to problematize what appears to be the victimization of women. Students also tended to miss how such gender construction serves dominant interests and reinscribes male privilege. In today's atmosphere of curriculum revision to acknowledge diverse voices, popular music offers an important transgressive site where experiences long denied as part of the learning process can be both acknowledged and interrogated. Popular music proceeds largely by metaphor, and its seductive nature makes it an important place for teachers to instruct students concerning such cultural representations. Instead of ignoring violence, teachers must examine its underlying ideologies and thereby involve students in a critical consumption of the culture in which they are embedded. (Contains 20 notes.) (HB)

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The Knower and the Known: Exploring Issues of Violence Against Women in Popular Music

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What language represents and what one experiences in language is my particular concern with respect to popular music. In other words, I am concerned with how words and images are taken up in the lives of young people. Regardless of whether our teacherly stance is impositional or imposing, oppositional or opposing, or whether we position ourselves in accord with a student-centered classroom, how curriculum is taken up by students and how students reveal what they understand may be more a matter of interpretation and the perceived need to represent knowledge in a particular manner than anything else. The texts students create either through reading/writing, through oral dialogue, or in some other performative mode such as song or dance may suggest more about our students themselves, the knower, in this instance, than about what is known. Because students represent what they know in a variety of ways but often according to some dominant set of ideas related to world view, responses may vary according to teachers, peers, and possibly parents, but generally according to whose glance tends to count most. So it's the articulated as well unarticulated but often thought/felt responses to some popular music that interest me here.

One young woman produced a project that examined song lyrics and music videos -- largely heavy metal -- most of which suggested gender imbalances that tend to perpetuate patriarchal privilege and brutalize women. In each song sexually violent acts occur. My student counted the word "kill" fourteen times, "dying" twelve times, "death" seven times, and "slaughter" once all in one album alone -- Metallica's Master of Puppets.[1] The cover page of her project depicted an album cover by Guns and Roses[2] that seemed to work even harder to visually exploit women. The cover portrays a woman who is literally bound and gagged, her features distorted and her body contorted into a shape that makes the sexualized female subject into a monstrous or grotesque image.

The reporting style of my student's project; i.e., counting negative images in a half-dozen song lyrics/music videos created an oppositional space for some impositional teaching. In other words, Tracey's project exposing the violence against women in some popular music provided an opening for interrogating representations of sexuality. In The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality, Annette Kuhn writes that through feminist analysis and intervention we might come to recognize the inconsistencies and contradictions embedded within mainstream images of women, we might begin to understand how these dominant representations work, and through such cracks or fissures we might glimpse the possibility of a world outside the order normally seen.[3]

Exploring issues of violence against women in song led to examining problematic associations of identity and difference in students' interpretations of Tracey's project material under discussion. For example, with respect to a song entitled "Baptism by Fire" by a rock group who call themselves Winger, lyrics tell the story of a prostitute who trades "flesh for gold. . .and her voodoo for a bible of who's who."[4] As we discuss sexual images, what seems to become obvious to most students is that while we can critique the images in the song, difference related to identity is relational and none of us have particular experiences like the one in question. An impositional moment occurs, and I raise the question David Crownfield raises in Body/Text in Julia Kristeva: "Can my identity be informed by, modeled in relation to, the life of another whose experience is incompatible with my difference, my gender, my anatomy, my sexuality, my politics?"[5] The representations of sexuality in this song translate then into difference in relation to power and suggest that identity may be formed and informed by difference. For example, the female subject of the song may subvert the dominant order by "short-circuit[ing] systems of cultural repression"[6] (i.e., reversing her subordinate, non-sexualized position) and by placing herself in the dominant role, but the powerful roots of her female agency remain locked in a phallic economy that brings her role under subjugation and returns the male's role to that of the privileged conqueror. As Shari Benstock suggests, short-circuiting the system leaves no space to

negotiate sexual difference.[7] And bel hooks states explicitly, "these celebrations. . .do not successfully subvert sexist (/racist) representations.[8] The subjects own exploits bind her to the erotic exchange for which she both receives currency and serves as currency -- the left-hand defying the system, the right-hand encoding it.

As sexist mythology would have it, students often saw women as deserving of their situations and often saw no need to problematize what I read as victimization. When women were represented as what hooks calls the "embodiment of the best of the female savage" (though she was referring specifically to black women)[9] or as one lyric from "Slice of Pie" by Motley Crue put it, a "kitten with a whip"[10], students, and not just male students, saw this as "just the way things are," or "some women like those labels." And when we discussed the lyrics from a Motley Crue song, "Sticky Sweet," that read, "the way she walks. . .should be a crime,"[11] one student said, "yeah, some women don't just like it, they ask for it." No student saw these representations as a part of a dominant way of organizing men and women's lives, as a social construction of gender that serves dominant interests and reinscribes male privilege. No student readily saw the power relations imbedded in such images. No student seemed to understand the violence suggested in the naming of women as chattel or commodities when stamped "U.S. Grade A. . .Guaranteed" as in the Van Halen song "Good Enough."[12] Violence and victimization are projected onto a sexualized personae in

these representations and students interpretations suggest yet another representation -- one that is dominant, prevailing, and seems to celebrate what Gail Faurshou explains as "the appropriation of the [female] body as its own production/consumption machine."[13] The subtext of these lyrics and videos becomes a visual narrative as the camera focuses on body size and body parts and on achieving a look of desirability. And not unlike the Guns and Roses album cover to which I've previously alluded, the sadomasochistic imagery of the music video "Where There's a Whip There's a Way" by Faster Pussycat depicts a woman strapped to a rack, eyes glowing, as the "dehumanizing master" says "you'd better start talking, cause I get what I'm after."[14]

If one of the most important but also the most difficult tasks facing us today is the need to revise curriculum so that it acknowledges the diverse voices, experiences, and cultural traditions of students attending our schools, then popular music offers an important transgressive site where experiences that have long been denied as a part of the processes of learning may be both acknowledged and interrogated. The language of popular music may be a natural place to enter such a conversation, for that language seems to be inextricably bound to the social and ideological; it seems to be a language that can work to contest power or it can legitimate it.

Creative acts can mark resistances yet they can also signal seductions. As a form of avant-garde literature (to use Julia

Kristeva's words), popular music seems to proceed by metaphor. What may seem like binarism may be the double-languaging of metaphor says Kristeva: metaphor is both dialogical and relational.[15] And the double-languaging of metaphor is the double-languaging of creative acts that are capable of simultaneously using and subverting the dominant order. Although the advent of heavy-metal music, in general, and its rise in popularity may be due in part to its critique of working-classes and response to job layoffs, plant closings, homelessness, and so forth, the music described here is offered as a caveat -- on the one hand, it defies the system, on the other, it continues to inscribe the dominant order through sexist language.

Because popular music can be seductive, it seems particularly important then for teachers to take up these contradictory issues in order to help students deconstruct such music and music videos in the service of also teaching about the partiality of that form of cultural representation. If as Gloria Anzaldua suggests, we inscribe culture through popular forms,[16] then it seems necessary to help students raise questions about the nature of such a culture.

Because artistic representation or the material linkage of language and form, in this case popular music, is a specific structure that mediates relations, Anzaldua compares it with political activism and says creative acts are like "trying to outshout a roaring waterfall." In as much as "we build culture as we inscribe in these forms,"[17] she says, we also inscribe

tradition. Thus artists/musicians are positioned in the place Benstock refers to as overlap between textual spaces and cultural spaces[18] -- between what Raymond Williams called residual and emergent meanings and practices[19]

Metaphor and transgression then involve relation and the crossing of borders, especially those deemed proper. Therefore, when students suggest to me that kids don't really pay that much attention to the lyrics of the music they listen to because they are so sensitized, I recognize that response as a conditioned representation of what the knower knows about dominant culture and the status quo. I recognize it as a "proper" response. But I ask, "If song lyrics don't effect conscious awarenesses, how do they effect subconscious minds? How do lyrics that represent women in a sexist manner become instances of violence to women? And how is that violence perceived subconsciously? How is it consciously manifest in the interpretations students make?

Instead of ignoring violence, we need to examine its underlying ideologies, but more importantly, perhaps, its effects on individuals and on our society. We need to make problematic the harm such violence brings not just to women but to all who are uncritical consumers of the particular version of popular culture packaged in some popular music and music videos. And especially important might be an examination of how such acts signal protest, if indeed they do. Here, however, it may be less important to ponder the deliberate nature of protest or

perpetuation and more important to ask, who stands to gain, who stands to lose in either case?

While it may be one thing to recognize and accept as part of a cultural experience all kinds of media texts; it is another to teach students to be critical consumers of that culture. By helping students question the nature of violence, we expose negative stereotypes and we question the social and economic/ materialistic structures that mediate sets of relations and seem to perpetuate the representations the music and music videos discussed here sell. In Popular Culture, Schooling, and Everyday Life, Henry Giroux and Roger Simon state that such explorations help students recognize "the limits and partialness of specific languages, cultures, and experiences in terms of both positive and negative impacts."[20] Exploding curricular boundaries can create spaces through which to challenge dominant representations that reside within the multiple and contradictory positions students voice. And identifying places of possible productive transformation may lead the way to more just schooling in a more just society.

Endnotes

1. Metallica, Master of Puppets (Los Angeles: Asylum Records, 1986).

2. Guns and Roses, Appetite for Destruction (New York: Asylum Records, 1985).

3. Annette Kuhn, Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality (New York: Routledge, 1985).

4. Winger, "Baptized by Fire" (New York: Polygram, 1988).

5. David Crownfield, Body/Text in Julia Kristeva: Religion, Women, and Psychoanalysis (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 141.

6. Shari Benstock, Textualizing the Feminine: On the Limits of Genre (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 96.

7. ibid.

8. bel hooks, "Selling Hot Pussy," in Black Looks: Race and Representation (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 61-77: 64.

9. ibid, 72.

10. Motley Crue, "Slice of Pie," MTV.

11. Motley Crue, "Sticky Sweet," MTV.

12. Van Halen, "Good Enough," MTV.

13. Gail Faurshou, "Fashion and the Cultural Logic of Postmodernity." In Body Invaders, Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, eds. (Canada: New Word Perspectives, 1988).

14. Faster Pussycat, "Where's There's a Whip There's a Way" on Smashes, Thrashes, and Hits (New York: Polygram, 1992); also on MTV.

15. Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater." Leon S. Roudiez, trans. In The Kristeva Reader, Toril Moi, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 160-186.

16. Anzaldua, Making Face, Making Soul, (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990), xxiv.

17. ibid, xxiv.

18. Benstock, Textualizing the Feminine.

19. Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

20. Henry Giroux and Roger Simon, Popular Culture, Schooling, and Everyday Life (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1989), xi.